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St. Paul's Lutheran Church
2100 16th Street SW
Austin, MN 55912-1749
Pastor Ted Barthels
Sermon preached on
March 14, 2021
4th Sunday in Lent

Scripture Lesson: Ephesians 2:4-10
Passion History: Jesus Before Pontius Pilate
Hymns: 394; 144; 175; 173:1

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sermon Text: Numbers 21:4-9

Then they journeyed from Mount Hor by the Way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the soul of the people became very discouraged on the way. ⁵ And the people spoke against God and against Moses: "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For *there is* no food and no water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread." ⁶ So the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died.

⁷ Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD that He take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people.

⁸ Then the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery *serpent*, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live." ⁹ So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived. (NKJV)

This is the Word of God.

Sanctify us, oh Lord, through Your truth. Your Word is truth.
Amen.

In Christ Jesus, our Crucified Savior, dear fellow Redeemed:

INTRO: Old Testament Bible History points us to the cross.

At times we may be inclined to use the expression “Bible stories,” and then think that these Biblical accounts are simply stories of what happened it times of old. We may assume the benefit is limited to the adage that those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it. Others may remind us of the powerful truth that as we make our way through the Old Testament, we will see how the Lord directed the course of human events to arrive at the one central point in all of world history, the life and ministry, and crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

That is indeed an important lesson for us to learn and appreciate. But there is more. The Lord used events like the one before this morning in our text not only to teach the Children of Israel important spiritual lessons, but also to bring us those same lessons in a powerful and memorable way. The lesson before us this morning is more than interesting Bible history. The Lord is calling us to consider how we also should learn the lessons of salvation from this account. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Romans: *“Whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.”* (Romans 15:4) It is evident that we should not dismiss the Old Testament writings any more than any of the Scriptures, but rather seek the Holy Spirit’s guidance that we might *“grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”* (2 Peter 3:18) In this lesson of the Bronze Serpent in the wilderness the Lord, the God of our salvation, leads us --

THEME: To Look to the Cross for Salvation.

It all begins with understanding for ourselves –

I. Sin’s Devious Ways.

This event took place near the end of the forty years of wandering in the wilderness, a test for Israel because of their failure to trust in the Lord to bring them victory over their enemies. After all that time they were almost at the border of Canaan and were ready to

enter and take possession of the Promised Land, but Edom the nation descended from Israel's brother Esau, would not allow them to cross their land to reach their goal, and the Lord had forbidden them to engage Edom in war. Edom was not among the nations falling under the judgment of God. It meant turning back once more into the wilderness and making a huge detour around Edom before ending their long sojourn in the wilderness. The people of Israel were disappointed, and disappointment led to discontentment, and complaining, and dissatisfaction with the Lord and His gracious providence. Our text reports --

Numbers 21:4 – 5 “Then they journeyed from Mount Hor by the Way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the soul of the people became very discouraged on the way. ⁵ And the people spoke against God and against Moses: “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For *there is no food and no water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread.*”

In these verses we see the progression of sin. Due to the weakness of the flesh, we are as susceptible as anyone to the same kind of slide into sin. It appears to be natural enough in the beginning to feel some disappointment and then discouragement, but look how quickly that turned into complaining about the Lord's care of the people and even speaking against the Lord Himself. It is nothing less than open rebellion to accuse the Lord of working for His people's harm and destruction and not their good and blessing! That is what the people of Israel were saying, and then they added to their sin by speaking out against the Lord's providence. For forty years they had manna from heaven for their daily bread; they needed only to walk outside in the morning and gather their daily bread and prepare in any variety of ways. But they were sick and tired of manna from heaven! And they were equally tired of having only barely enough water. They despised the goodness of the Lord. They forgot that their clothes had not worn out those forty years and they had been well provided for even in the most severe circumstances. And they failed to learn the lesson we all need to take to heart. “*Man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord.*” (Deuteronomy 8:3)

It was necessary for the Lord to respond lest the sin take hold of the whole nation and they turn away from God and be lost forever. The serious nature of their sin needed to be impressed upon them that they might be brought to repentance. That is always the goal when the Lord disciplines His children.

Numbers 21:6 So the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died.

Harsh. We may be tempted to think that God was harsh! Did they deserve such a severe response from the Lord? The lesson we need to learn for our sinful flesh is indeed, such a harsh response was called for, for sin brings death. James wrote of sin's progression in the heart of man with these words: *“each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.”* (James 1:14-15)

We have our own struggles with the desires of the flesh. Often like the children of Israel we fail to recognize that what we want will draw us away from the Lord. It often begins with dissatisfaction with the Lord's blessings in our lives. The progression of sin in our hearts, and then in our lives is set in motion, without giving a thought to exactly where the fulfillment of our wants and desires will lead us in our relationship with the Lord. Often it will have a most deleterious effect on our spiritual lives, endangering our soul's salvation. If sin is allowed to have its way, in the end it brings forth death.

Already in a state of rebellion, how would the people of Israel respond to the chastisement of the Lord? Many people all around the camp were being bitten by the poisonous serpents and dying! It brought them to their senses. It brought them to their knees in penitential sorrow! They responded by --

II. Turning to the Lord.

Numbers 21:7 Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD that He take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people.

They didn't hedge. They confessed that they were guilty before the Lord. They had sinned and now they turned to the Lord in repentance, seeking the Lord's mercy and forgiveness. They looked to the Lord for deliverance from the judgment that had befallen them. Moses was ready to intercede for them before the Lord. He prayed for the people.

This was hardly the first time that Moses was in this position of interceding for the people of Israel before the Lord. While Moses words from this occasion aren't recorded, it is good for us to remember the consistent framework of Moses' intercession for the people on those other occasions. He didn't argue that the people weren't all that bad and had some redeeming qualities, so maybe the Lord should give them another chance. No, that would have been all wrong. Moses consistently approached the Lord based on the words and promises of God. Moses would bring up the Lord's promises to Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, that they were to possess this land, and that they and their Seed, the Christ, would be a blessing to all the nations of the earth. So, it was in consideration of the faithful promises and the grace of God that the Lord should be merciful and forgive.

We daily sin much and indeed we also deserve nothing but punishment. It would be absurd to approach God on the basis of our own merit or worthiness. It is always God's own words and promises that form the foundation of a gracious relationship with the Lord. This serves as the basis for us to come before the Lord in sorrow, confessing our sin, and seeking His forgiving grace.

Moses received the Lord's response. The people were to find –

III. God's Deliverance in the Cross.

Numbers 21:8-9 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery *serpent*, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live." ⁹So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived.

It was a symbol or a type of Christ crucified that the Lord presented to the people as the way out of this catastrophe they had brought upon themselves with their sin. This was a gracious response by the Lord. The danger was still present. People were still being bitten, but the pole with the bronze serpent was erected where people would be able to turn and look with eyes of faith and be saved. We see the grace of God in this response, for by His power people were delivered from death. However, we see there was another ingredient in the Lord's response. When the people were bitten by the venomous serpents, they had to have **faith** in the word of God that turning, searching out that bronze serpent would save them. People could, and it would seem that some did, think it pointless to seek out and look with faith to the bronze serpent. I suppose that some thought it silly, thinking how is that going to help? Maybe they attempted to treat the bites themselves, or to pursue and try to kill all the serpents. We are told that it took that look that was set in motion by faith for people to live. It was the only way to be saved!

And so it is for us yet today. Jesus picked up on this Biblical event that we might understand the power and grace of the cross. Jesus told Nicodemus: *“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”* (John 3:14-15)

The Lord directs our attention to the cross of Calvary. It is Jesus on the cross who took our sin upon Himself. It was Jesus who *“was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities.”* (Isaiah 53:5) The Lord promised a Savior from sin, and in Jesus' death upon the cross that promise was fulfilled. The magnitude of God's grace is evident in the cross. God's power to save is evident in the result, we have been delivered from death through Jesus' death and resurrection. And yet it requires that one last thing, faith, faith that is instilled in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. **Faith** draws us to the cross. **Faith** leads us to look upon that cross and see there our hope of life. **Faith** clings to Jesus Christ alone. He is the **only** way to be saved!

We thank and praise our gracious Lord that He has presented the cure for the deadly poison of sin in Christ crucified, and that He

has drawn our eyes to look upon the cross of Christ and find there our life and salvation.

“Drawn to the Cross, which Thou has blest
With healing gifts for souls distressed,
To find in Thee my life, my rest,
Christ Crucified, I come.

“Thou knowest all my griefs and fears,
Thy grace abused, my misspent years;
Yet now to Thee with contrite tears,
Christ Crucified, I come.

“Wash me and take away each stain;
Let nothing of my sin remain.
For cleansing, tho’ it be thro’ pain,
Christ Crucified, I come.”

(The Lutheran Hymnal 390:1-3)

AMEN.

“Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Amen. (Romans 15:13)